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Hazel Wood Waterman ©SDHS #88:16649-9 Waterman Family Collection

UNA CASA DEL PUEBLO — A TOWN HOUSE OF OLD SAN DIEGO



Winner of the 2004 Institute of History Mary Ward Award
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“The Spanish Dons, rather than the Mexican *paisanos*,
became the symbols of the Spanish past.”

— Carey McWilliams, *Southern California, An Island on the Land*, 1946

All around the empty plaza stood the crumbling adobes and roofless walls of another time. One of them, the Casa de Estudillo on the southeast side of the plaza in Old Town San Diego State Historic Park, had been bought in 1906 by the sugar magnate and investor John D. Spreckels. Hoping to capitalize on Old Town's tourist potential, he extended his streetcar line up Calhoun Street to the plaza. Two years later his vice president and managing director, William Clayton, hired a 43-year old widow recently turned designer to research and restore the historic ruin. Her name was Hazel Wood Waterman, the daughter-in-law of former Governor Robert Whitney Waterman and then employee of noted San Diego architect Irving Gill.¹

Completed in 1910, the restoration launched one of California's first historic tourist attractions and in the process helped to inspire a nostalgic fetish, an antiquarian enthusiasm for the state's Spanish heritage. An estimated 125,000 people visited the Casa de Estudillo in 1915, the same year that the Panama-California Exposition opened in Balboa Park.² San Diego had been “discovered” by the outside world, but what was the appeal of this restored adobe in a backwater village on the outskirts of the modern city?

To unravel the knot of this question requires an investigation into the power and interplay of myth and history. What was the history of the casa and the Estudillo family who lived there until 1887? How accurate is Waterman's restoration in terms of design, use of materials, construction methods, landscape, and furnishings? What was her research approach? Her source(s) of information and inspiration? What did the Casa de Estudillo signify to early twentieth-century California society? How did myth and history as popularized in literature, film, and art shape or alter the historic memory of the visiting public?

History of a House and a Family

Built between 1827-1829 by Lieutenant José Antonio Estudillo, this adobe town

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house would become the social and ecclesiastical center of Old Town San Diego during the Mexican and early American periods.³ Born in 1803 at Monterey, José Antonio was the sixth child of José María, the Spanish-born comandante of the San Diego Presidio. His mother was María Gertrudis Horcasitas, a native of Tlayacopa, Mexico.⁴

Educated, proud, and handsome, José Antonio embodied the bearing of a Spanish gentleman. But he was not a pureblood Spaniard, nor did he support continued Spanish colonial rule. Influenced by Mexico's struggle for independence from Spain, he became a steadfast advocate of republican self-rule. In 1833, he and five other adult male citizens drafted a petition, urging the governor to establish a civil government in place of continued military rule by the presidio's comandante.⁵ Two years later the governor declared Old Town San Diego as an official *pueblo* to be governed by an elected town council. During Mexican rule, Estudillo played an influential role in the town's nascent political life, serving as treasurer, tax collector, *juez de paz* (justice of the peace), and finally as *alcalde* (mayor) in 1837-38. In 1850, under American rule, he served as treasurer, tax collector, and county assessor.

José Antonio Estudillo also supported the breakup of the mission system in the early 1830s. Not only did it embody the last vestige of feudal Spanish rule in California, but its monopoly of land and Indian labor had inhibited development. Under the supposed enlightened leadership of rancheros like himself, secularization would reverse this trend. Estudillo had extensive landholdings, with grants to Rancho Temecula (1823), Rancho Janal (1829), and later Rancho San Jacinto Viejo (1845). He also served as the *mayordomo* or administrator of the Mission San Luis Rey from 1840 to 1843.⁶

In 1824, he married María Victoria Domínguez, the daughter of José Cristobal Domínguez, a sergeant in the cavalry stationed at the presidio. Like José Antonio, she was a Californio, born in 1802 at the San Diego Presidio. Typical of many of the early Spanish colonial settlers, she had come from a racially-mixed family. Her father was born at the presidio of Loreto in Baja California, and her mother, María de los Reyes Ybañez, in the Mexican frontier province of Sinaloa. A woman of unbounded charity, Victoria raised her 10 children, 4 grandchildren, and 5 nieces and nephews in the casa, all of them baptized in the Roman Catholic faith. She also adopted and raised several Indian orphans at the home.⁷

Estudillo undoubtedly built this *casa de poblador* or townhouse to accommodate his wife and their large extended family, which included at varying times members of the Pedrorena and Domínguez families.⁸ Judge Benjamin Hayes, who later resided in the home, called it and the nearby Bandini home "mansions." Built with Indian labor, the single-story, whitewashed adobe, which was enclosed on two sides (L-shaped) around an inner courtyard, reflected a rustic elegance unmatched in Southern California of that day. Indian workmen carried the pine timbers from the Cuyamaca forest. The casa's ridgepole frame was bound and fastened together with narrow strips of rawhide to overhead crossbeams. The two-to-four foot thick adobe-brick walls were built on a river-cobble foundation. The main entrance was a narrow *zaguán* or covered central passageway from the plaza.

Sometime in the 1830s, José Antonio added another wing facing San Diego Avenue. The home originally had earthen and then brick tiled floors (except the *sala* or living room, which had a pine-board floor), clay-tiled roofs, wood-barred windows, and interior wooden shutters. Indian servants sprinkled the earthen floors with water to keep them hard. The rooms were generally square and nearly all of them were



Casa de Estudillo, January 1, 1893. Collection of Marjorie Reeves, Rancho Santa Fe.

interconnected with doors.⁹

With the abandonment of the nearby presidio and its chapel, the Estudillo home became the pueblo's unofficial church.¹⁰ On September 29, 1851, Catholic parishioners laid the cornerstone for a parish church to be built that would accommodate their religious needs better than the Casa de Estudillo's little chapel. John Judson Ames, the hulking owner and publisher of the *San Diego Herald*, captured the solemnity of the public procession on the plaza:

At 4 o'clock precisely, the folding doors of a large apartment in the house of Don José Antonio Estudillo...were thrown open, and a procession composed of the most esteemed and cherished members of the Church Universal, with the learned and devout 'Padre'...at their head, preceded by...youths dressed in snow white frocks and bearing in their hands silver vases and gold and silver candlesticks..., issued into the Plaza,...until it reached the sacred spot....The priest consecrated with holy water the foundations of the building; after which, a scroll containing a memorandum of the date and place...was securely sealed in a vessel of indestructible [sic] nature, and placed under the cornerstone about to be laid.¹¹

Funds for constructing the church, however, failed to materialize, and visiting priests continued to say Mass for Old Town's Roman Catholic community in the chapel until 1858, when the new church, the Immaculate Conception, at last opened on nearby Conde Street. The large front room in the Casa de Estudillo's southwest corner was the "old chapel room" according to Judge Benjamin Hayes. Later, it was partitioned with a reception room opening onto San Diego Avenue and the larger inner room serving as the chapel.¹² After secularization, Mission San Diego de Alcalá's properties, including vestments, crucifixes, candlesticks, and paintings, were stored at the home until the Immaculate Conception opened.¹³

With the additional wing, there were twelve rooms, including bedrooms, a servants' quarter, kitchen, work and storage rooms, a living room and dining room, and the chapel. According to historian George Walcott Ames, the kitchen had a magnificent open fireplace or *parilla* to barbecue beef. Most adobe houses of that day had fireplaces located outside, given the susceptibility of roofing thatch to catch fire. All of

the rooms were coated with a mud plaster and then painted with a lime-based white-wash. On top of the roof was a turreted balcony, accessible by a stairwell. Seated here, family and friends watched the bullfights, horse races, and fiestas on the plaza. The Mexican flag flew from the flagpole atop the roof.¹⁴

During the U.S.-Mexican War, when Californio troops loyal to Mexico briefly lay siege to San Diego in 1846, women and children often took refuge at the Estudillo home. Its thick walls protected them from the sporadic musket fire coming from the enemy's entrenchment on Presidio Hill. The siege continued until a rag-tag force of Californio volunteers, led by Captain Santiago E. Argüello, and U.S. Marines routed the Californios.

The war years were an uneasy time for townspeople, including the Estudillos, despite their neutrality. The presence of hundreds of U.S. soldiers and volunteers strained services like housing and food. Outlying ranchos were abandoned under the threat of losing cattle to marauding soldiers or lives in Indian raids.¹⁵

After the war, cattle and land prices soared as thousands of Argonauts poured into the frontier state, often stopping at San Diego on their way to the Sierra gold-fields. One of the county's largest landholders, José Antonio Estudillo and his family shared in the bounty. In 1850, his landed assets exceeded \$25,000. They included three ranchos totaling 57,831 acres, 400 head of cattle, 300 other field animals, 20 horses, 600 fanegas of wheat, 400 fanegas of barley, and an array of less valuable goods. The *casa* that year was valued at an additional \$5,000.

On July 19, 1852, Don José Antonio Estudillo died. His death heralded a more uncertain and anxious time for the family. By 1855, livestock prices had dropped due to competition from Arizona and New Mexico cattlemen. Floods in the winter of 1861-1862 followed by a three-year drought brought further ruin. The boom-bust cycle not only shrank family assets but it also bred squabbles and dissension. By 1856-1857, the house, which had been deeded to Victoria Domínguez and the eldest son, José María, had dropped in value to \$3,500.¹⁶

Relations among family and in-laws became increasingly strained. During the 1860s there were at least a half-dozen transfers of property and several lawsuits involving family members. For instance, in 1855 and again in 1863, José María Estudillo mortgaged his interest in the house probably to help defray debts from his ranching investments.¹⁷ On January 11, 1869, María del Rosario Estudillo de Ferrer sued her mother Victoria Domínguez and other family members at the house, claiming that the deceased had left the house to her; the defendants were "tenants in common." During the trial, José Guadalupe Estudillo, who lived in the house with his mother, submitted a revealing account ledger. It showed that nearly \$650 had been spent between November 1865 and July 1869 to keep the house in "tenantable repair." These included installing glass windows, repairing and whitewashing the northeastern wing's (Calhoun Street) exterior adobe walls, building an adobe corral, digging and roofing a well for the animals, remodeling rented rooms in the wing on Calhoun Street, and reroofing the southwestern wing with wooden shingles.¹⁸

The motives behind these improvements were twofold. First, the Estudillos incorporated American building materials and methods into the rehabilitation. Materials like nails, windows, paint, shingles, wood frames, and oil stains would reduce the labor associated with maintaining adobe buildings against moisture and other elements. Their use also reflected a fusion of local building traditions and materials with imported Yankee technology and building practices. Second, renting rooms out to



Veranda, 1910. ©SDHS, Hazel Wood Waterman Collection MSS 42, Box 1, Folder 13

respectable tenants would supplement Victoria Domínguez's financial assets. Among those to whom she rented rooms were Benjamin Hayes, a Democratic Party district judge and historian, and David Hoffman, a surgeon and Democratic Party assemblyman. Both men were political associates of her son José Guadalupe Estudillo, who was elected state treasurer in 1875. Hayes and his second wife, Adelaida Serrano, actually honeymooned at the house. They lived in the former chapel and two nearby rooms from August 1866 until November 1867, a time that the judge fondly remembered as "winged hours of bliss."¹⁹

Along with providing lodging for renters, the building also housed a primary school during the early 1860s. The school was located in the central room of the southwestern wing (San Diego Avenue). It measured twenty by forty feet, and had a twelve-foot high ceiling. Victoria Domínguez and Victoria Pedrorena de Magee, a member of the extended family and resident of the home, taught at the school.²⁰

The front of the imposing adobe facing the plaza was bereft of vegetation. Historic photographs of the plaza in the early 1870s reveal a barren landscape. Only a few bare saplings, wrapped in a wire mesh to protect them from animals, were planted in front of the casa. Grazing cattle and foraging wild animals were a constant nuisance. "The cattle range almost up to the doors of the hacienda itself," recalled Helen Elliott Bandini, "and while ordinarily kept by the vaqueros at a respectful distance, had there been flowers or greenery to tempt their greedy appetites, no effort of the herder could have restrained them from stampeding for the coveted object."²¹

The inner courtyard, while the Estudillos lived in the house, served multiple functions. It was a place of entertainment as well as work. All of the rooms opened onto the courtyard. Overhead verandas of clay tile bordered it on three sides. Lillian

Whaley recalled that “the courtyard was a big square, bare place with a fig and pepper tree here and there, a few geraniums and a well in the centre.”²² It was the gathering place for family parties, christenings, and feast day commemorations. Family and friends spent considerable time underneath the verandas, smoking, chatting, knitting, and playing guitars and violins.

But the courtyard was also a place of work. Indian servants baked bread in large, beehive-shaped ovens or *hornos*, spun cotton, hung clothes, made adobe bricks, groomed horses, and tended gardens and orchards.²³ By the early American period (ca 1850s) a flour milling operation had been started in an enclosure between the Bandini and Estudillo houses. There was, according to city historian Clarence McGrew, “a line of wagons and carts from the ranchos standing in this end of the plaza, during the harvest time, with grain for milling.”²⁴ *Vaqueros* (cowboys) deposited freshly butchered meat from the ranchos in the corral behind the rear patio. Here, it was cut into long, sinewy strips and placed on a low adobe wall to dry in the sun.

On October 18, 1873, Doña Victoria Domínguez de Estudillo died. Her death symbolized the twilight of a fading era. By this time, Old Town had been upstaged as the county’s commercial and civic seat by New Town, its rival to the south on the bay. An uncontrollable fire in April 1872 had gutted the town’s commercial hub on the plaza. “One by one the landmarks have disappeared from the old Plaza. . . Its glory is departed with its departed people,” wrote a regretful Corinne Lillian Whaley in 1882.²⁵

Like the plaza, the home fell on hard times. Victoria Domínguez deeded the house to her sons, José Guadalupe and Salvador. In 1875, Guadalupe was elected state treasurer, and after a momentous ball given in his honor at the home, he and his family departed for Sacramento. Salvador and his family remained in the home until 1887, when they moved to Los Angeles, leaving the house in charge of a Mexican caretaker.

The building thereafter rapidly fell into disrepair as it became linked in the public imagination with Helen Hunt Jackson’s best-selling novel, *Ramona* (1884). Tourists began flocking to the old adobe out of the mistaken belief that the chapel had once been the setting for the marriage between the novel’s two principal characters, Ramona and her Indian lover Alessandro. The caretaker, recalled Salvador in 1909, “sold the tiles, adobes and locks” to souvenir collectors, telling them that it was “the home of Ramona.” Vandalized and stripped of its materials, the historic adobe quickly disintegrated. In 1906, Salvador sold it to Nat Titus, an agent for John Spreckels, for \$500.²⁶

Waterman’s Vision of Restoration

Hazel Wood Waterman was an unlikely candidate to restore the historic Estudillo home as she was not a licensed architect. A designer for the noted architect Irving Gill, it was her second major assignment.²⁷ Furthermore, she was a woman, a widow with three children to support. However, by the standards of the day, she had impeccable qualifications. She had worked under the guidance of one of San Diego’s master architects, and had an “instinctual” grasp of design, according to Gill. She had taken design and mechanical drawing classes at a local correspondence school. She also was an accomplished painter and a published author on adobe structures. More importantly, she had a vision about southern California’s early Hispanic heritage, albeit one that was considerably romanticized.²⁸



Making tiles, c. 1908-9. ©SDHS #85:15370-5 Hazel Wood Waterman Collection

Passionate about the project, Waterman gleaned information about adobe structures from primary sources and old photographs, interviewed “old timers,” and spoke to Charles Fletcher Lummis and other promoters of the state’s Spanish colonial heritage.²⁹ She visited the missions at San Juan Capistrano, Santa Barbara, San Gabriel, San Luis Rey, and San Diego de Alcalá. She also went to Pio Pico’s rancho at Whittier, Cave Couts’ Rancho Guajome, the De La Guerra residence in Santa Barbara, and the Avila House in Los Angeles. Most importantly, she spent time at the Estudillo house — a “pathetic ruin” in her words — and the other adobes of historic Old Town. By the early twentieth century, the site of the first European settlement in California was no more than a great square surrounded by crumbling adobes and roofless walls, “a monument to the past, a finger pointing out the endless changes of time and tide,” in the words of one contemporary.³⁰

Waterman built the restored house on its original footprints. The front on the plaza side measures 113 feet 9 inches long and the two adjoining wings 96 feet 6 inches and 98 feet 6 inches ft. each. Like the original, the building was (and still is) a one-story, U-shaped adobe with a central passageway. It has twelve rooms, all of which open onto the enclosed courtyard.³¹ She hired only Mexican workmen familiar with traditional adobe-building methods.³² They mixed stable straw, seaweed, broken shells, and soft clay, and then kneaded and packed the dough-like substance into wooden molds. The molds were set on their sides to dry in the sun “for not less than thirty days, turning at least twice to prevent cracking.” The new adobe bricks were 16 inches long x 8 inches wide x 3 inches thick. Workmen used, when possible, material from the original ruin.³³

No nails were used to assemble the wood frame and roof. Instead, hand-hewed crossbeams were notched, as if pulled by oxen, and fastened with narrow strips of rawhide to the ridgepoles. Beams and posts were “aged” by soaking them in the mud

flats along the bay. Once the frame was completed, round rafters were laid across the roofline and covered with seaweed, mud, and a tule thatch, called *carrizo*. This gave the roof a slight undulating sag unlike a tile roof laid on shakes or asphalt. Fired clay tiles were then set in the thatch. Many of the tiles of the roof and verandas extending along the courtyard were from the old mission aqueduct. There was a cupola or small tower on the rooftop similar to that of the original house.³⁴

The veranda ceilings were made of bound reeds supported by the rafters. Adobe walls, both exterior and interior, were plastered with two coats of clay mortar and then whitewashed. The whitewash was mixed with cactus juice to give the substance a consistency almost as thick as glue. Like the original home, the windows were protected with wooden bars. Floors were composed of irregular sized, clay ladrillo tiles, tamped and puddled on sand fill.³⁵

Like other early twentieth-century preservationists, Waterman was deeply influenced and captivated by the Spanish Colonial revival in architecture, which had deep roots in Southern California. As she herself wrote: "It seemed to me that the Estudillo house should be restored as a typical aristocratic dwelling of Spanish and Mexican California, representing those days 'when it had served no mean purpose,' a relic of that unique California civilization nowhere else to be found and almost forgotten."³⁶

Given the dearth of specific records and her idealized image of the Californio past, Waterman took some creative license in her restoration. For instance, lintels, sills and frames were stained with blue dyes, and the shutters with a pepper tree green dye. All interior woodwork was oil stained, and largely redwood instead of pine. Crossbeams, rafters, and posts were red cedar instead of pine timber. These rusticated features were an outgrowth of Waterman's fascination with the arts and crafts movement, another expression of the revival in Spanish architecture and decorative arts. Windows were paned glass, unlike the originals, which were probably covered with hides, until the development of the hide and tallow trade during the 1830s-1840s.³⁷ Workmen also built three fireplaces that did not exist in the original home. Many of the doors and windows, based on photographs taken before the restoration, were put in different locations.³⁹

According to Edwin Clough's *The House of Estudillo*, a souvenir book written to promote the opening, most of the furniture was made of rosewood and mahogany from the forests of Chiapas (southern Mexico) and Honduras. The timbers were brought to the Estudillo home in the ballasts of Yankee hide and tallow ships in the late 1830s. Indian carpenters, according to Clough, hewed these fine woods into simple chairs and bedsteads.⁴⁰ The dining room had a heavy carved walnut table and handsome copper and silver urns, plates, and jugs. Lillian Whaley recalled that there was "no unnecessary excess of furniture in any of the rooms" during the family's last years at the casa. She described how "chairs of bamboo, cane and even of rawhide interlaced, were arranged close together against the white walls all around the front room, set apart for the reception room."⁴¹

Waterman had planned to furnish the main rooms both with "beautifully finished furniture" from Europe and the Orient and with locally-owned pieces. During the Mexican and early American periods, the rooms probably had contained a mixture of local rustic and imported decorative wares. However, once the restored house was advertised as "Ramona's Marriage Place" instead of the "Casa de Estudillo," descendants of some of the old Californio families who had promised to loan family heirlooms to her quickly withdrew their offers to help.⁴² After Waterman's departure, the



Drying adobe bricks, c. 1908-9. ©SDHS #2387

showman Tommy Getz filled many of the rooms with Ramona bric-a-brac and religious relics and furnishings from the mission period.⁴³

In the early 1970s, on the eve of the nation's bicentennial, California State Parks authorized the local chapter of the Colonial Dames of America to prepare a furnishing plan. Headed by Mary Belcher Farrell, a second-generation La Jollan, the committee furnished the principal rooms with ornate imported pieces from Europe and the Orient. For instance, the sala had a Chinese chippendale sofa, Turkish carpet, Spanish highbacked chairs with needlepoint seats, and an 1853 mahogany Steinway parlor-box grand piano. The master bedroom had Persian rugs, a rosewood canopied four-poster bed, an Italian secretary, and a brass Spanish crucifix, ca 1800. Some of these furnishings have been removed, but many visitors still have the mistaken impression that the Estudillos embodied the lifestyle of a transplanted Spanish aristocracy rather than that of a wealthy Californio ranching family.⁴⁴

Waterman's landscape for the courtyard deviated from its historic use as an outdoor workplace. Using Rancho Guajome as a model, she designed the outlying gardens in a romantic Mediterranean style. The patio courtyard measured 75 feet by 75 feet. On each side at the mid-point, a brick tiled walkway led to a central walkway encircling a pool and fountain. The garden beds featured climbing roses and geraniums. Earthen-red pathways wound through the rear gardens and underneath arbors covered with vines. "The old garden is always a riot of color, flowering shrubbery, climbing vines, roses and dozens of old fashioned flowers are always blooming, summer or winter, between the sanded walks," marveled one *San Diego Union* reporter. Mission palm, fig, orange, lemon, mulberry, pomegranate, and guava trees shaded the grounds. Ten-foot high adobe walls capped with mission tiles extended out from the wings on Calhoun Street and San Diego Avenue.⁴⁵

Among the most fanciful features of the garden were the fountain, walkways, arbors, and adobe walls, none of which had existed while the Estudillos resided on the premises. Pre-restoration photographs, although few in number, show two or three fig trees and a well, but no formal walkways or fountain in the courtyard area and no adobe walls extending out from the casa. Writing in the early 1920s, Clarence McGrew claimed that the restored landscape was “considerably idealized.” In his opinion, the “courtyard of the days of its usage was not a bower of flowers.”⁴⁶

Like most Californio families, the Estudillos planted functional, not ornamental, plants such as fruit trees, vegetables, herbs and flowers. In fact, José María Estudillo, the family patriarch who spent his last years at the house, was quite interested in horticulture. During the late 1820s, he sent to his friend, Francisco de Paula Marin who lived in Honolulu, slips from his olive orchard, a box of small peach trees soaked in water, and seeds to grow citron, mint, borage, rue, and canohalagua, an herb used to alleviate fever and dropsy.⁴⁷

Ramona’s Marriage Place: The Interplay of Myth and History

In 1910, much to Waterman’s dismay, Spreckels leased the property to Tommy Getz, a minstrel performer from the Midwest, who had no experience in historic or museum management. In the same year he opened the restored landmark as a museum to glowing reviews. The *Los Angeles Times* announced in its June 10 issue:

Old Town is waking!...At the very door of one of the oldest adobe houses in the hamlet, which has been entirely restored, as nearly as possible along the old lines, and now hundreds visit Old Town every day where dozens visited it in months in the past. Yes, Old Town is waking and again coming into her own.

With Spreckels and Clayton’s endorsement, Getz advertised the building as “Ramona’s Marriage Place,” not the “Casa de Estudillo.” To celebrate its opening, he planned to stage Ramona in the courtyard during the autumn when “the stars above, and the big mellow moon, will peer down upon the players and their audiences,” enthused the *San Diego Sun*. Workmen painted a large scarlet sign with the words, “Ramona’s Marriage Place” on the adobe façade. Sightseers traveled by streetcars labeled “Ramona’s Marriage Place.” In his sales shop, Getz sold Indian beadwork and baskets, mission statuary, deluxe editions of the novel *Ramona*, and a large number of postcards, all of them stamped with “Ramona’s Marriage Place” on the reverse side.⁴⁸

Getz’s postcards, which were sent all over the country, enticed thousands of visitors with fanciful images of the courtyard fountain, mission bells, and garden of flowering shrubs and fruit trees. Perhaps, the most incongruous, unhistorical feature was the “wishing well,” erected in 1910, underneath a vine-covered pergola at the end of a walkway. On a weather-beaten board above the well was the inscription:

Quaff ye the waters of Ramona’s well;
Good luck they bring and secrets tell;
Blest were they be sandaled Friar;
So drink and wish for they desire.⁴⁹

The grounds were decorated with Indian handicrafts, wagon wheels, and other Spanish-era curios. Each year, dozens of newlyweds were married in the musty, candle-lit chapel, which featured a centuries-old, hand-carved Black Madonna. Getz gave daily lectures on local history, much of it sentimental and folkloric. As he put it in his self-published pamphlet, *The Story of Ramona’s Marriage Place*, “his daily lecture on the history of the old house, with its memories of Ramona, is a constant treat to all who



Rear courtyard and gardens, mid-1920s. Postcard from the author's collection.

enter its restored and beautiful walls." After 1924, when he bought the property, Getz converted one of the rooms into a cyclorama painting, depicting the missions in the novel. By this time, the museum's artifacts "related only in the vaguest sense to the Estudillo family, but they were excellent props for Getz's stories about Ramona," concluded one student.⁵⁰

The Estudillo family questioned the museum's direction under Getz's management, in particular, his emphasis on a legendary romance rather than the history of a real family. When José Guadalupe Estudillo complained in 1913 that the building was misnamed, William Clayton responded that the building's appeal was its "connection with the book written by Helen Hunt Jackson...It would have no value whatever if it were advertised as the Estudillo house." "People go see it (Ramona's Marriage Place) and become charmed it with," he acknowledged, "merely for what it is, irrespective of the fact (if) Ramona was married there or not, or whether there was ever any Ramona."⁵¹

Hollywood further promoted the myth on the silent screen. In 1910, *Ramona*, directed by D. W. Griffith and starring Mary Pickford, the first of five films based on the novel, opened, although it was not shot on location at the historic adobe. Other films used the adobe as a set because it provided one of the few exotic settings in southern California that could be used in films about far-off lands. In 1912, cameraman William Paley of the Nestor Company shot his first documentary, *Estudillo House California*, which played upon the Ramona connection. The following year the Edison Company shot scenes from *The Old Monk's Tale*, featuring Harold Lloyd, one of the great silent film comedians, in his first role. In 1916, a few scenes from *The Americano*, written by San Diegan Anita Loos and starring Douglas Fairbanks as a young dare-devil American mining engineer in Central America, were shot at the adobe. A year later, the house appeared in *Ashes of Hate*, a story of male rivalry for a woman's love directed by George Melford and produced by Jesse Lasky, who founded the first feature film company in Hollywood with his brother-in-law Samuel

Goldwyn.⁵²

The Ramona legend particularly appealed to Anglo-American newcomers to California, many of whom yearned for the pastoral values and craft traditions that they imagined had existed in a simpler, agrarian time. They had arrived at a time when Southern California was undergoing a startling transformation, becoming more urbanized, industrialized, and populated. Largely middle class, they had both the leisure and means to patronize Spanish-styled tourist sites and resorts. For many of them, "Ramona's Marriage Place" came to embody the simplicity, grace, and romance that they imagined had existed in the "Days of the Dons." The Ramona craze lasted into the late 1930s when the threat of totalitarianism and wartime upheaval in Europe and Asia redirected the attention of the nation.

The developers, writers, artists, architects, and other promoters of the Ramona legend were consciously aware that theirs was the handiwork of fiction but they did not seem to mind. In 1910, the writer Edwin Clough wrote:

Romance colors the old chronicle and weaves itself on the fabric of fact until it is impossible to discriminate the true from the false, the real from the unreal. And what matters it, after all? Is not the story of Ramona as sweet and beautiful in its humanity and its pathos, as the story of the Estudillos in its record of pastoral and patriarchal simplicity...?⁵³

As historian Kevin Starr pointed out, this mythological Spanish past "had behind it the force of history, in that California began as part of the Spanish Empire."⁵⁴ By portraying California's Hispanic past in such romantic, idyllic tones, its Anglo-American promoters gave the region a new source of tradition and continuity.

The Challenge of Historic Preservation

Today, the Tommy Getz era no longer exists. The pergola, wagon wheels, and other Ramona paraphernalia have been removed. The Casa de Estudillo is now interpreted as a historic Californio home by California State Parks. In 1970, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places as it represents "probably the finest extant example in the United States of a typical large Spanish-Mexican one-story town-house."⁵⁵

What conclusions can we draw? First, we stand on the shoulders of earlier preservationists like Hazel Waterman, despite the fact that their values and approaches were demonstrably different from those of succeeding generations of preservationists. Waterman lived at a time when many Americans, unnerved by the industrial and urban revolutions and the disappearance of the Last West, harkened back to a simpler, agrarian time. In a word, they idealized America's frontier heritage or, for Waterman and her contemporaries, the "Days of the Don." This "mythical Spanish age" was celebrated by influential Southern California writers like Charles Fletcher Lummis and George Wharton James for its refinement, hospitality, and virtue. This caused Waterman to restore and preserve the Estudillo home "as a typical old Spanish California dwelling," not "as it was originally, nor as it developed thru changes and alterations." For her, the Estudillos were descendants of a family of "aristocratic Castilian lineage," not racially-mixed Californios living in a remote outpost under Mexican rule.

Waterman's restoration was noteworthy in that it pioneered the use of traditional building methods and materials. She employed Mexican workmen who knew how to make tiles and adobes "in the old way." They knew how to notch the crossbeams, round the rafters, and insulate the rooflines with a tule thatch.⁵⁶ She took creative

license in her landscape design. The original Estudillo home, for example, had no fireplaces, stained woodwork, or courtyard features, such as the water fountain and outer adobe walls.

Since Waterman's time, adobe restoration has radically changed. Today, it is largely a public profession. Historic and archaeological resources are subject to multiple laws, regulations, and guidelines about preserving a structure, building, or site's historic integrity, excavating and removing artifacts, complying with health and safety requirements, and providing access to disabled visitors.⁵⁷

Reconstruction methods and materials also have continually changed. In the late 1930s the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and again in 1969 California State Parks forsook traditional labor-intensive, adobe making and construction practices in order to structurally stabilize the Estudillo landmark. CCC workmen, ignorant about traditional methods, mixed cement in the plaster and painted the adobe. The historic fabric was further damaged when contracted State Parks workmen installed concrete columns in the adobe walls and rippled the plaster finish.

Today, State Parks preserves the Estudillo House by using mainly traditional adobe-building methods and fabric. Stabilized adobe is used in foundation rehabilitation to stabilize walls, and heavy visitor traffic has necessitated the replacement of historic clay fabric. As an example, the 1910 clay ladrillo tiled walkway beneath the veranda of the house has been replaced with pressed concrete adobe tile.⁵⁸

Few preservationists today have the vision of a Hazel Waterman. California's staggering growth and development after World War II has largely destroyed the historic settings that offered earlier generations a glimpse into early nineteenth-century California life. That past for Waterman, walking among Old Town's crumbling adobes in gloomy silence, was very real. For us, it is an abstraction. Old Town has evolved into a major tourist destination with dozens of concessions. The plaza with its large shade trees and paved walkways, trellised gardens and shop patios, lighted up every night, represents an alluring but false historical setting. The noise and pollutants from the surrounding freeways and the maze of parking lots further detract from the park's historic setting. Old Town's history of Californio families like the Estudillos no longer exists except in the illusive annals of a forgotten past.

NOTES



1. Sally Thornton, *Daring To Dream: The Life of Hazel Wood Waterman* (San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 1987), 64; Waldo Waterman, interviewed 1958, transcript, San Diego Historical Society (SDHS) Oral History Archives, 8.
2. Keith A. Sculle, "The Power of Myth in Ramona and Ramona's Marriage Place," *The Mid-Atlantic Almanack*, 12 (2003), 95.
3. After Mexico had gained its independence from Spain in 1821, the newly formed Republic barred Spaniards living in Mexico from owning land. Consequently, José María Estudillo turned his property over to his son, José Antonio, who was a Mexican citizen by birth.
4. On José Antonio Estudillo's upbringing, see Marie E. Northrop, *Spanish-Mexican Families of Early California: 1769-1850* (Burbank, CA: Southern California Genealogical Society, 1976), 2: 84-85; Barbara Palmer, "Estudillo Family," *Old Town Character Studies: Sketches and Sources* (typescript, Old Town State Historic Park Library, San Diego, 2001), 4, 6, 9.
5. These individuals were Juan María Osuna, Francisco María Alvarado, Manuel Machado, Jesús Moreno, and Ysidro Guillén.

6. See Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of California* (San Francisco: The History Company, 1886), 2:542-43, 546-47, 3:63, 605, 612, 614, 616, 623-24; Rose Marie Beebe and Robert M. Senkewicz, eds., *Lands of Promise and Despair; Chronicles of Early California, 1535-1846* (Santa Clara: Santa Clara University, 2001), 390-394; Benjamin Hayes, *Emigrant Notes*, 2:329-33, MSS C-E 62, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (hereafter Bancroft Library); William E. Smythe, *History of San Diego, 1542-1908* (San Diego: The History Company, 1908), 1:169.
7. Two of Victoria Estudillo's twelve children died in infancy. See José Guadalupe Estudillo to his nephew Miguel, May 13, 1906, Estudillo Family Papers, MSS C-B 899, 2, Bancroft Library; Iris Engstrand, *San Diego California's Cornerstone* (San Diego: Sunbelt Publications, 2005), 61-2; Palmer, *Old Town Character Studies: "Pedrorena Family,"* 1; "Domínguez/Reyes-Ybañez Families," 1, 2, 4; "Estudillo Family," 5, 9-10; Smythe, *History of San Diego*, 1:169.
8. José Antonio and Victoria Estudillo's daughter, María Antonia, married Miguel de Pedrorena, a wealthy Spanish-born sea trader, in 1842. They resided in San Diego near the Estudillo casa until Miguel's death in 1850. The following year María Antonia died, leaving four children to be raised by Victoria.
9. Hayes, *Emigrant Notes*, 1:153, 165; 3:452, 618, MSS C-E 62, Bancroft Library; George Walcott Ames, *California Historical Landmarks Series, La Casa de Estudillo Registered Landmark #53* (Berkeley: Department of Natural Resources, Division of Parks, 1936), 7-8; C. Lillian Whaley, "California's Oldest Town," ed. June A. Reading (unpublished work, Whaley House, San Diego), 18; Dale B. Miller, "The Casa de Estudillo," (unpublished work, Old Town State Historic Park Library, n.d.), 1-3; David Thompson, "Ramona's Marriage Place," *California Magazine* (n.d.), 30, California Room, San Diego Public Library (SDPL).
10. The Mexican government abandoned the San Diego Presidio after 1837. In 1839, the chapel was the only building still standing at the presidio. It continued to be used to administer the sacraments. By 1848-49, it was a complete ruin.
11. Quoted in James Nolan, *Discovery of the Lost Art Treasures of California's First Mission* (San Diego: Copley Books, 1978), 17-8.
12. Benjamin Hayes, *Notes on California Affairs*, MSS C-E-81, folder 9, Bancroft Library; Whaley, "California's Oldest Town," 13.
13. Nolan, *Discovery of the Lost Art Treasures of California's First Mission*, 19.
14. Richard Pourade, *Property of Old San Diego* (San Diego: San Diego Union-Tribune Publishing, 1962), 4-5; Whaley, "California's Oldest Town," 9; Edwin Clough, *Ramona's Marriage Place, The House of Estudillo* (Chula Vista, CA: Denrich Press, 1910), 8; Ames, *La Casa de Estudillo Registered Landmark #53*, 7-8.
15. Bancroft, *History of California*, 5:326-28; Hayes, *Notes on California Affairs*, MSS C-E-81, folders 4 and 5, Bancroft Library; Benjamin Hayes, *Diary* (1875), 236-239, CT-2551, Cave Coutts Collection, Huntington Library; Engstrand, *San Diego California's Cornerstone*, 74.
16. Mario T. Garcia, "Merchants and Dons, San Diego's Attempt at Modernization, 1850-1860," *The Journal of San Diego History*, 21, no. 3 (Winter 1975), 69-71; San Diego County Tax Assessment Roll (1850), Box 1, folder 1, SDHS; Robert Glass Cleland, *The Cattle on a Thousand Hills, Southern California 1850-1880* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1941); Engstrand, *San Diego California's Cornerstone*, 85. See also "Notes from Estate of Miguel Pedrorena," in José Antonio Estudillo Papers, Document File, SDHS. In 1856, according to this source, Rancho San Jacinto's valuation was \$15,400, roughly one-half of José Antonio Estudillo's total assets.
17. See *Deed Book E* (November 17, 1855), 405; *Deed Book II* (April 25, 1866), 253; *Deed Book III* (September 10, 1868), 252; *Mortgage Book I* (January 4, 1863), 92-3; San Diego County Tax Assessor's Office. See also Raymond Brandes, *Report* (Southern Service Center, Department of Parks and Recreation, 1976), 1-2.
18. Remodeling included hanging new doors, painting interior walls, and oil staining wood work. Nails were used. *Rosario Estudillo de Ferrer vs. Victoria Dominguez de Estudillo*, et. al., 17th District Court, July 11, 1869, Case 198, Box 5, folder 8, SDHS.
19. Alex Bevil, *History of San Diego—As Seen Through Its Architecture* (unpublished work, Southern Service Center, Department of Parks and Recreation, 1996); Hayes, *Emigrant Notes*, 217; Hayes, *Notes on California Affairs*, folder 5.
20. Nolan, *Discovery of the Lost Art Treasures of California's First Mission*, 18.
21. "Old Town from Presidio Hill," Henfield photograph, ca. 1867-68, neg. no. 3864 in *Old Town to 1874*, Book 46, SDHS; "Estudillo House," photograph, ca. 1872-1874, neg. no. 80-2863 in *Old Town, Casa de Estudillo, 1872-1910*, Book I, SDHS; quoted in Helen Elliott Bandini, "Spanish Days," *The Federation Courier*, 11, no. 4 (February 1911), 13.

22. Quoted in Whaley, "California's Oldest Town," 19.
23. Charles McGrew, *City of San Diego and San Diego County* (Chicago and New York: American Historical Society, 1922), 54.
24. Quoted in McGrew, *City of San Diego and San Diego County*, 53.
25. Quoted in Whaley, "California's Oldest Town," 17.
26. Salvador Estudillo to William Clayton, July 30, 1909, Hazel Waterman Papers, MSS-226, Box 1, folder 13, SDHS; Deed Book 417 (January 4, 1906), 60, San Diego County Tax Assessor's Office. Historic photographs reveal the Estudillo home to be a veritable ruin by the 1890s, nothing but crumbling earthen walls without windows, doors, and a roof. See *Old Town Casa de Estudillo, 1872-1910*, Book I, SDHS.
27. In March 1908, she completed the design of the William Clayton residence. See Waterman, "Memoranda," Hazel Waterman Papers, MSS-226, Box 2, folders 6, 13, SDHS.
28. Thornton, *Daring To Dream*, 63-67; Carol Greentree, "Hazel Waterman," *Pioneers of American Landscape Design*, ed. Charles Birnbaum and Robin Karson (New York: McGraw Hill Press, 2000), 431-434; Engstrand, *San Diego California's Cornerstone*, 127-8.
29. Waterman was familiar with the following works: Alfred Robinson, *Life in California* (New York: Wiley & Putman, 1846); Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* (London: E. Moxon, 1841); Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of California* (San Francisco: The History Company, 1886).
30. Waterman, "The Restoration of a Landmark," Waterman Papers, Box 1, folder 11, p. 5, SDHS; Harriet Harper, *Letters from California* (Portland, ME: B. Thurston & Co., 1888), 74. See also Waterman, "The Influence of an Olden Time," *The House Beautiful*, 14, no. 1 (June, 1903), 3-8; Waterman, "Notebooks," Waterman Papers, Box 1, folder 6, SDHS.
31. "José Antonio Estudillo House," (1937), drawing no. 2, *Historic American Buildings Survey* (HABS, CAL, 45); Waterman, "Restoration of Landmark," 6.
32. Workmen did not use traditional clay mortar; instead, they mixed it with "cement mud." Cement and lime mortars are incompatible with traditional (or unstabilized) adobe brick because they expand and shrink less than does adobe. Consequently, the adobe brick either pushes against or pulls away from the mortar, causing cracking. Cement was also used in the foundation. See Waterman, "Specifications for Restoration of Typical Old Spanish California House," Hazel Waterman Papers, Box 1, folder 12, p. 10, SDHS.
33. Waterman, "Restoration of Landmark," 5; Waterman, "Specifications for Restoration," 9.
34. Waterman, "Restoration of Landmark," 5-7, 10; Waterman, "Specifications for Restoration," 13-14; A. P. Nasatir and Lionel U. Ridout, "House of José Antonio Estudillo," *Report to the Mayor and City Council of San Diego and Historical Site Board on Historical Survey of Old Town Plaza* (typescript, San Diego State University Library, 1967), 16-17. Historic photographs indicate that the cupola had been removed from the rooftop by the early 1870s.
35. Waterman, "Restoration of Landmark," 6; "Specifications for Restoration," 10, 12, 14.
36. Waterman, "Specifications for Restoration," 4.
37. According to a front-page feature story, "small panes of glass were put in" during the late 1840s. "Old Town: San Diego's Suburb that Has Existed a Century," *San Diego Union*, August 28, 1887.
38. There are no chimneys in the 1869, 1880, and 1900 photographs of the Estudillo House. The 1869 photograph by Rudolph Schiller, a "Daguerreian artist," who lived in Old Town, is the earliest known photograph of the house.
39. Waterman, "Restoration of a Landmark"; Waterman, "Specifications for Restoration"; "Estudillo House," photograph, ca. 1872-1874, neg. no. 80-2863 in *Old Town, Casa de Estudillo, 1872-1910*, Book I, SDHS. On the relationship between the arts and crafts movement and broader Spanish colonial revival in Southern California, see James Early, *Presidio, Mission, and Pueblo: Spanish Architecture and Urbanism in the United States* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 2004), 201.
40. Waterman, "Restoration of Landmark," 7-8; Clough, *Ramona's Marriage Place, The House of Estudillo*, 16.
41. Whaley, "California's Oldest Town," 18.
42. Waterman, "Restoration of Landmark," 12.
43. For example, see interior house descriptions in *San Diego Union*, December 16, 1912, 9; December 22, 1912, 14; February 24, 1914, 18; January 1, 1915 (Exposition Edition).

44. San Diego County Committee, Colonial Dames of America, *Contents of Casa de Estudillo*, (typescript, San Diego Coast District Office, Department of Parks and Recreation, n. d.), 1-10; Elinor Richey, *Remain To Be Seen: Historic California Houses Open to the Public* (Berkeley: Howell-North Books, 1973), 143; Mary Belcher Farrell, interviewed 1985, transcript, SDHS Oral History Archives, 11-12; Legler Benbough, interviewed 1985, transcript, SDHS Oral History Archives, 9; *San Diego Union*, December 11, 1973, D2:6-7.
45. Waterman, "Plans for House and Garden at Old San Diego," September 1908, SDHS; "Ramona's House Visited by Hundreds Yearly," *San Diego Union*, January 1, 1918, 5; Troy Jordan, "Historic Landscape Recommendations," (unpublished work, Estudillo Building Vertical File, Old Town State Historic Park Library, n. d.); Waterman, "Restoration of Landmark," 6; Waterman, "Specifications for Restoration," 7, 9, 16.
46. Waterman, "Specifications for Restoration," 7; McGrew, *City of San Diego and San Diego County*, 54.
47. José María Estudillo to Francisco de Paula Marin of Honolulu, January 26, 1826, August 8, 1827, and August 26, 1828, José María Estudillo Papers, Doc. File, SDHS.
48. Allen Henry Wright, "Awakening of Old Town," *New York Times*, June 21, 1910; photograph, c. 1910, in Clough, *Ramona's Marriage Place*, 27; "May Stage Ramona at Old Town," *San Diego Sun*, August 16, 1910, 1; Carl Heilbron, ed., *History of San Diego County* (San Diego: San Diego Press Club, 1936), 276-277; Tommy Getz, *The Story of Ramona's Marriage Place* (North San Diego, CA: T. P. Getz, n.d.), 8-9; Sculle, "The Power of Myth in Ramona and Ramona's Marriage Place," 105-106; Charles A. Lamb, "The Restoration of the Casa de Estudillo" (unpublished work, SDHS, 1970), 5-6.
49. Getz, *The Story of Ramona's Marriage Place*, 8; photograph, c. 1910, in Clough, *Ramona's Marriage Place*, 27.
50. "Marriage Place of Ramona at Old Town is Mecca of Tourists," *San Diego Union*, January 2, 1911, 2-3; "Glass Engravings of Old Missions Placed on Exhibit," *San Diego Evening Times*, March 25, 1911, 10; "Romance Lives in Old Home of Estudillo," *San Diego Union, Exposition Edition*, January 1, 1915; Getz, *The Story of Ramona's Marriage Place*, 8-10; Sculle, "The Power of Myth in Ramona and Ramona's Marriage Place," 103; Lamb, "The Restoration of the Casa de Estudillo," 6-7.
51. William Clayton to José Estudillo, San Diego, December 12, 1913, as quoted in Lamb, "The Restoration of the Casa de Estudillo," 8
52. See Gregory L. Williams, "Filming San Diego: Hollywood's Backlot, 1898-2002" (unpublished work, SDHS, 2003), 8-9, 28-29; *San Diego Union*, December 20, 1912, 6; November 17, 1916, 5; January 25, 1917, 4.
53. Clough, *Ramona's Marriage Place*, 31. Much has been written on the nostalgia for what Carey McWilliams once called a "Spanish fantasy heritage." For a discussion on its relevance to Ramona, see Franklin Walker, *A Literary History of Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), 125-132; David J. Weber, "The Spanish Legacy in North America and the Historical Imagination," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 23 (February 1992), 11-13; James A. Sandos "Historic Preservation and Historical Facts: Helen Hunt Jackson, Rancho Camulos, and Ramonana," *California History* (Fall 1998), 181-183; Phoebe S. Kropp, "All Our Yesterdays': The Spanish Fantasy Past and the Politics of Public Memory in Southern California, 1884-1939," (Ph. D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 1999), 1-2, 17-23. For an example of early twentieth-century Ramona literature, see George Wharton James, *Through Ramona's Country* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1909).
54. Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850-1915* (Santa Barbara and Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, Inc., 1981), 390, 396-97.
55. National Trust for Historic Preservation, *National Register of Historic Places, 1966-1994* (Washington, DC: The Preservation Press, 1994), 76. In 1932, the building was listed on the California Register as Historical Landmark #53. See Office of Historic Preservation, *California Historical Landmarks* (Sacramento: California Department of Parks and Recreation, 1990).
56. Waterman, "Restoration of Landmark," 3; Waterman, "Specifications for Restoration," 6, 16, 21-2.
57. Secretary of the Interior, *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring and Reconstructing Historic Buildings* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, 2001); Secretary of the Interior, *Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1979).
58. Alex Bevil, *Historic Structure Record* (San Diego: Southern Service Center, 2001), 1-2, 12-3; Bevil, *Primary Record* (San Diego: Southern Service Center, 2001), 4, 6; Department of Parks and Recreations, Resources Agency, Architecture Section, *Building Condition Assessment: Casa de Estudillo, Old Town San Diego State Historic Park* (Sacramento, June, 1998), 3, 13-14. These sources are at the Southern Service Center, Department of Parks and Recreation, San Diego.